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The retiring admiral testifying at a House committee hearing

Vanishing Act by a Popular Spook

Bobby Inman leaves the CIA, claiming the reasons are personal

Members of Congress serving on committees that keep an eye on the CIA have long faced a tricky challenge. Short of employing truth serum or lie detectors, how can they know when officials of an agency trained in the art of deception are dissembling? One such CIA watcher on the House Intelligence Committee swears he discovered an infallible method. Whenever CIA Director William Casey was testifying in secret meetings, the Congressman watched the feet of Casey's deputy, Admiral Bobby Inman. If the admiral shuffled his feet or reached down to pull up his socks, the Congressman concluded that Inman knew that his boss was shading the facts. Sure enough, when questioned, the admiral would delicately correct the director.

If Inman's telltale fidgeting was subconscious rather than intentional, it was one of his few professional imperfections. In Washington's atmosphere of political intrigue, most high CIA officials develop more enemies than friends. But when the White House last week announced Inman's impending retirement from both the CIA and the Navy, the praise for the four-star admiral was downright gushy. Democratic Congressman Edward P. Boland, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, called Inman "the nation's finest professional intelligence officer." Democratic Senator Joseph Biden even called Inman "the single most competent man in the Federal Government."

Inman's bipartisan popularity stems largely from his straight talk and incisive mind. His virtually photographic memory and workaholic habits pushed him to the top of a career in military intelligence: director of the National Security Agency, 1977 to 1981; deputy director of Central Intelligence Agency, 1976 to 1977; director of the National Security Agency, 1977 to 1981.

As head of the NSA, a supersecret agency that uses satellites, sophisticated monitoring techniques and more employees (more than 20,000) than the CIA (some 16,000) to gather intelligence information, Inman developed considerable rapport with congressional committees. When President Reagan was looking for a CIA chief in late 1980, Inman was pushed hard by diverse Capitol Hill backers, most notably Republican Senator Barry Goldwater. Instead, Reagan picked Casey, who had been his campaign director. A bit reluctantly, Inman left NSA to become Casey's deputy. Reagan talked him into it, he said, with "the smoothest job of arm twisting I've ever encountered."

CIA Director Casey

Why was Inman, 51, now leaving the CIA? The admiral told TIME that he felt he had accomplished what he had set out to do at the agency: "Get a road map created for a long-range rebuilding program all across the whole intelligence community." Having done that, he insisted, he was stepping down to build a second career in private business, earn enough money (he now gets $59,500) to put two teen-age sons through college, and spend more time with his family. Admitting that his career had involved "wretched work habits and hours," Inman said his eldest son had asked last Christmas: "Where's the quality of life in all this?" That, said Inman, was "a invidious comparisons both unfair to Bill and embarrassing to me."

Inman often clashed with the staff of Reagan's National Security Council, particularly with former National Security Adviser Richard Allen. One quarrel was over an Executive order supported by the NSC that would have given the CIA broad authority to spy on U.S. citizens at home when they were linked to "significant foreign intelligence" operations. Inman did not publicly object to this domestic CIA role, but he did oppose giving the CIA a free hand in the types of activities it could probe and the methods it could use. Largely because of his efforts, the order was tightened to put clearer limits on what the CIA could do at home.

More recently, Inman was said to have been upset by White House leaks that sought to buttress Administration policies in Central America and especially by the contention that the Soviet Union and Cuba were behind the trouble in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Although Inman generally shared the Administration's thesis, he felt that its disclosures about U.S. surveillance of the region compromised CIA intelligence-gathering methods.

At the White House, some presidential aides suspect that Inman's friction with Allen, who quit in January after disclosure that he had accepted gifts from a Japanese magazine, spilled over into hostility between Inman and Casey, since Casey and Allen had long been allies. Inman concedes that the "air might have had a little strain in it" when Casey was being investigated and Inman was seen as a successor, but he insisted, "The personal working relationship has been very easy from the start."

Beyond that, said the admiral, "all the stories that are running around about major policy differences and personality disputes are just plain false." He contended that he was involved only in the routine kind of conflicts that always go on in Government and that they had nothing to do with his resignation. Unfortunately, Bobby Inman made that point in a telephone conversation. There was no way to determine whether he was hitching up his socks as he spoke. —*By Ed Magnuson.*